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ABSTRACT

The only feasible path to a truly critical pedagogy is the destruction of the university. Before teachers and students ever arrive in the classroom, they have certain "places" within a blind, faceless institution which mark them in ways which must somehow be overcome for a truly critical pedagogy to develop. Analyzing how these roles are produced and reproduced ideologically suggests that the result of this reproduction is something profoundly anti-intellectual and anti-educational that is literally built into the system within which critical teaching methods must develop. Critical pedagogy must attempt to subvert these institutional constraints from within, and changing the system of power requires abandoning the goals of the "university" education and beginning to develop the tools for education. This does not mean quitting jobs or trying to shut down the university; rather, it means using the established institution against itself, creating spectacles in the university that might compete with those offered on television, and might thus help to bridge the gap between education and everyday life. Being critical means constantly traversing the artificial boundaries among disciplines, emphasizing the learning process itself rather than the list of works required for a particular niche-like specialization. Teaching should be more performance than ritual, and a goal should be to eliminate the deleterious effects of grades if not the grades themselves. (PRA)

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Power in the Classroom?
A Plan for the Destruction of the Universities

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Bernardo Attias

Power in the Classroom?
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> Last fall I spoke at Cornell and announced, "The food here is free!" and twenty of us went into the cafeteria, loaded our trays with hamburgers, Cokes, and pies, and walked out without paying. We sat in the dining hall laughing and slapping each other on the back stuffing our faces with Digger shit. I told them of epoxy glue and what a great invention it was. And at another school we asked them why they were there and they said just to get a diploma and so we passed out mimeographed sheets that said "This is a diploma," and asked the question again.[1]

That this anecdote, from Abbie Hoffman's landmark essay "Plans for the Destruction of the Universities," strikes me as an amusing relic from a mythic era has something to do with the fact that it was written two years after I was born. But more importantly it highlights three important factors that must inevitably problematize the search for a truly critical pedagogy. First, the students in the universities I have attended and observed in the past seven years are well behaved. Monstrously well behaved. Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* expresses outrage at the chaotic shambles he sees in modern university education and vehemently attacks the nihilistic and relativistic radical intellectuals responsible for this mess. I fully agree with Kingsley Widmer's response to Bloom, "I had not thought we had been so successful!"[2] In fact, we haven't. College students are in many ways the most blindly obedient and uncritical sheep I have ever encountered. Not only would the events described by Hoffman above be entirely unlikely in 1991; most students would view the actions described with revulsion if not horror. Second, in the wake of the recent television miniseries "War in the Gulf" and the rather feeble attempts on the part of student demonstrations to direct media attention (that is, advertising blips) away from the yellow ribbons and the stunning array of sophisticated gizmos

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1 Abbie Hoffman, "Plans for the Destruction of the Universities," *Revolution for the Hell of it* (NY: Dial, 1968) 157.

2 "Anarchist in Academe: Notes from a Contemporary University," *Social Anarchism* 14 (1989) 11.

capable of lofting all manner of shit into the desert, Hoffman's piece indicates just how little student radicals have learned in the past twenty years. Today's student radicals understand nothing about the media because today's students know nothing about the media, because their teachers know nothing about the media. But the media have completely redefined the ways in which university education must proceed if it is ever to resemble anything educational, intellectual, or critical. Finally, the title of Hoffman's piece suggests what in my mind is the only feasible path to a truly critical pedagogy: the destruction of the universities.

Before teachers and students ever arrive in a classroom, they have certain "places" within a blind, faceless institution which mark them in ways which must somehow be overcome for a truly critical pedagogy to develop. It is the purpose of this piece to analyze some of the ways in which these roles are produced and reproduced ideologically and suggest some of the results of this reproduction. What these results add up to, in my mind, is something profoundly anti-intellectual and anti-educational that is literally built into the university system within which critical teaching methods must develop. Critical pedagogy must attempt to subvert these institutional constraints from within; an arduous but necessary approach which implies turning university education against the essence of university education, an essence which I will argue is profoundly anti-educational. Thus, my plan for the destruction of universities attempts to sacrifice the university to what in my mind must be a higher goal, education. This would not entail the abandonment of some of the benefits of the university institutions; such as grants, fellowships, libraries, seminars, conferences, parties. But it must entail the rejection of the codes and relationships of power that have indelibly marked the university as a place where *education doesn't occur.*

Ivan Illich and Buckminster Fuller both offer far-reaching proposals for educational reform which at first seem irreconcilable. While Illich argues for "deschooling society,"[3] Fuller argues for a university from which noone ever graduates.[4] Both approaches, however, stem from similar perceptions of the university as an intellectually bankrupt institution. Illich and Fuller sense what all students learn in the university; perhaps the only thing students ever learn in the university, that real life is elsewhere. For Illich this is the result of the radical division established between "education" and "the world" by the system of compulsory education, such that "education becomes unworldly and the world becomes non-educational." (31) Widmer argues that the university embodies hierarchy, excessive bureaucratic compartmentalization, exploitative corporate subservience, and systematic mediocrity, (5). The insipid proliferation of distinctions and categories that confronts the university student heightens the absurdity of ever expecting an education out of a university. Widmer continues:

> Start with the obvious bureaucratization. The petty corruption is pervasive ... The character deformations from competitive hierarchy, however, are not the whole story ... The problem must also include that the academic is a "professional" (generally taken as an accolade), a prostitute inclined to proneness. And what ... has one sold out to? Often simply to institutionalization, that is, endless processing. But that processing expresses one of the more extreme styles of the division of labor -- division of thinking -- that fundamental source of hierarchical sensibility and its falsities ... One ends up thinking, and acting, in terms of specializations and their pyramidal structures. (6)

Of course, life in postmodern consumer society requires such a state of affairs; in fact "the modern economic system demands a mass production of students who have been rendered incapable of thinking."[5] Schools separate creative

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[3] *Deschooling Society* (Manchester: Penguin, 1971).

[4] R. Buckminster Fuller, *Education Automation*

[5] "On the Poverty of Student Life: considered in its economic, political, psychological, sexual, and especially intellectual aspects, with a modest proposal for its remedy," by members of the Situationist International and students of Strasbourg, November 1966; in Ken Knabb ed. and trans., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 321.

writing from literature so that students specialize in one or the other, and we wonder why our writers don't read? Of course, college students have come out of years of such absurdity in their elementary and secondary educational institutions, so it should be no surprise that even at its best the university provides corporations with a new crop of semi-literate market researchers and promotional workers each year, turning out only the occasional artist, writer, or teacher who almost invariably ends up perpetuating the institution's bureaucratic inertia. "In this ornate, multi-leveled, however muddled, fucking-over of semi-literacy, few come out writing well, and even fewer with much critical perception of the culture and society in which they live." (Widmer, 7)

Prince's brilliant admonition to parents in the media age -- "Don't let your children watch television until they know how to read or else all they'll know how to do is cuss, fight and bleed" -- is unfortunately an impossibility. Neil Postman outlines the critical contradiction of traditional education in the latter half of the twentieth century:

> There are some teachers who think they are in the "transmission of our cultural heritage" business, which is not an unreasonable business if you are concerned with the whole clock and not just its first 57 minutes. The trouble is that most teachers find the last three minutes too distressing to deal with, which is exactly why they are in the wrong business. Their students find the last three minutes distressing -- and confusing -- too, especially the last thirty seconds, and they need *help*. While they have to live with TV, film, the LP record, communication satellites, and the laser beam, their teachers are still talking as if the only medium on the scene is Gutenberg's printing press.[6]

Teachers cannot possibly hope to compete with the cathode ray tube when they regard their roles as transmitters of bodies of completely useless information. We ask students to be familiar with the standard texts of a given field rather than helping them to critically confront the endless barrage of information they

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[6] *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (NY: Dell, 1969) 13-4.

encounter daily. Composer John Cage points out, "The reason I dropped out of college was because I was absolutely horrified by being in a class which had, say, two hundred members, and an assignment being given to have all two hundred people read the same book. I thought that if everyone read the same book, it was a waste of people."[7] Moreover, do we really expect students to see the university environment as anything but a stultifying retreat from everyday existence when we tell them to read Plato before McLuhan and Rousseau before Nietzsche? But it is not the content of education that my criticism is principally directed at; it is the form. McLuhan's formula "the medium is the message" applies as much to the classroom as it does to the fax machine. Material behavior in the classroom is, in my view, infinitely more important than the specific informational contents of a syllabus. This material behavior is inevitably circumscribed by several institutional conditions: classes "meet" at a given time, according to a schedule; students and teachers alike have to fill out papers daily in order to legitimize their existence in the institution; students are assigned one of a totally unimaginative array of five letters at the end of each semester and this letter tells them how "good" they are; everything is geared toward a tedious, ritualized monotony with no room at all for spontaneity or creativity. If we do our jobs correctly the monotony is compounded by a teaching style that hasn't progressed since the fourteenth century: students face a single teacher at the front of the room who crams an astonishing number of lists down their throat (the five steps in a good oration; the three principles of rhetoric; the seven stages of a political movement; the four causes of the

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[7] Richard Kostelanetz, "John Cage on Pedagogy: An Ur-Conversation," *Social Anarchism* 14 (1989) 27.

American revolution; etc, ad nauseaum) while the students dutifully scribble and daydream.

In a mediated society, educators can no longer be content in losing the battle for the student's mind to the faceless bureaucracy of the institution or the soundbites of television advertisers. Power in postmodern society is exercised blindly by bureaucracies and concentrated only momentarily in orchestrated spectacles. Guy Debord writes of the commodity spectacle: "Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order, giving it positive cohesiveness. Objective reality is present on both sides. Every notion fixed this way has no other basis than its passage into the opposite: reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and the support of the existing society."[8] This is the aestheticization of politics a generation after Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and television; a generation with an attention span of just under 28 seconds and to whom Madonna is more real than Socrates could ever be. This aestheticization of politics has not, however, been accompanied by a corresponding aestheticization of education, and the power of the spectacle has been monopolized by the advertising moguls of commodity society -- so much energy poured into developing the perfect sound bite to make people buy; so little put into developing the perfect sound bite to make people think. How can we expect our students to be more interested in class than in television? The simple answer is that power is always blind and bureaucratic; power seems irresistibly entrenched in the structure of society because the structure of society is taken for granted. Foucault argues, "Power is everywhere; not because it

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[8] *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1977) thesis 8.

embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere."[9] This can seem disheartening for anyone who wishes to honestly challenge the way society is; however, the very blindness of power may be the most effective avenue for resistance. Power is not centralized in the university or network news: "power ... is not that which makes the difference between those who do not have it and submit to it. Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or a piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power."[10] As teachers we are all actively engaged in this vast network of power, reproducing the system where we do not challenge our given roles within the system.

The system of power is infinitely malleable, but changing it requires that we abandon the goals of *university* education and begin to develop the tools for education. This does not mean quitting our jobs or trying to shut down the university; rather, it means using the established institution against itself, creating spectacles in the university that might compete with those offered on television, and might thus help to bridge the gap between education and everyday life. Most emphatically, this gap needs to be bridged in both directions -- not simply opening education to the "real world," but also opening the "real world" to education. Being critical means constantly traversing the

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9 *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction Volume 1* trans. Robert Hurley (NY: Vintage, 1990) 93.

10 "Two Lectures," trans. Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, in Colin Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (NY: Pantheon, 1980) 98.

artificial boundaries between disciplines; emphasizing the learning process itself rather than the list of works required for a particular niche-like specialization. In today's world, the aestheticization of politics requires that teachers aestheticize the educational system; using the power of the spectacle as an educational tool in ways that subvert the power of the spectacle as an economic tool. Teaching should be more performance than ritual; when it becomes routinized it's time to throw away the syllabus and give everybody an A. While the abolition of grades is a worthy goal it is not going to be accepted by most universities in the near future; the only possible response to the competitive hierarchies of higher education is contempt -- the goal being to eliminate the deleterious effects of grades if not the grades themselves.

Of course, I have given little indication of what such an approach might look like if put into practice; while some examples are possible at this point much work needs to be done in terms of theorizing an academy without universities and an academic practice that effectively overcomes the routinization and compartmentalization inherent in the university system. But recognizing the problem means recognizing that this theorization must take place. Kingsley Widmer concludes:

> Obvious logic: To the degree that academicians can teach, they can also misteach. Learning is not a one-way street. And we misteach millions of inappropriate students the low arts of semi-literacy, trivialization, and uncritical spirit. That dominating vocation tends to denature the few things, the humanities and sciences, that the universities might be able to do well. As for the rest, from semi-pro sports to cultured marketing, from reinventing hierarchical sleaze to reblooming the ancient pomposity of resignation, from dull poets to deadly technocrats, bury them. Long live the university.... (12)